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Abstract

The failures of development efforts in underachieving countries bring into question the effectiveness of the structures and mechanisms that govern policymaking. Laos, in particular, is a small country located in Southeast Asia that has recently gained prominence in spheres of international development and the global marketplace. Since the mid-1980s, leaders of the state have implemented economic reform in hopes of achieving greater economic gain. Their efforts fall short, however, when many marginalized communities comprised of ethnic minorities fall deeper into poverty. In search of a better life, many made the decision to flee the country to escape their impoverishment. Those with experiences of transnational migration have consequently encountered a new time and space, generating unique desires and discontents. Those who remained in Laos have shaped their desires and discontents on the structures, policies, and reforms pursued by the government. Their time and space is embedded within the context of globalization. Examining the individual and personal experiences of Laotian-Americans and the Laotian population illuminate desirable qualities and characteristics of standards of living. This ultimately captures the value of cultural and social considerations in the grand scheme of development and reform.

Key terms: transnational migration, globalization, modernization, economic reform, communist takeover, anti communist, desire, discontent, American dream

Disciplines

Anthropology

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND POLITICAL EXILE IN LAOS

By

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Abstract

The failures of development efforts in underachieving countries bring into question the effectiveness of the structures and mechanisms that govern policymaking. Laos, in particular, is a small country located in Southeast Asia that has recently gained prominence in spheres of international development and the global marketplace. Since the mid-1980s, leaders of the state have implemented economic reform in hopes of achieving greater economic gain. Their efforts fall short, however, when many marginalized communities comprised of ethnic minorities fall deeper into poverty. In search of a better life, many made the decision to flee the country to escape their impoverishment. Those with experiences of transnational migration have consequently encountered a new time and space, generating unique desires and discontents. Those who remained in Laos have shaped their desires and discontents on the structures, policies, and reforms pursued by the government. Their time and space is embedded within the context of globalization. Examining the individual and personal experiences of Laotian-Americans and the Laotian population illuminate desirable qualities and characteristics of standards of living. This ultimately captures the value of cultural and social considerations in the grand scheme of development and reform.

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Introduction

She told me that it was about one or two o'clock in the morning when they had to cross the river. It had to be pitch black outside so the military guards who surveyed the area would not see them. They travelled in silence because a drop of noise would reveal their planned escape. My Mom, then 14 years old, sat still and quiet in a boat holding a small bag and her infant brother. She, her eight siblings, and my Grandmother were crossing the river in Savannakhet to meet my Grandfather in Thailand. He had fled the country before them to avoid being arrested since he had previously worked for the government. They reunited at a refugee camp in Thailand, spending nine months there before arriving in California in 1982.

Experiences of political exile and transnational migration are common to Laotian populations in the United States. The journey of migrating from a communist country to the United States is an overwhelming narrative ridden with waves of fear, discontent, and uncertainty. Overcoming an obstacle and experience so profound as this has nevertheless had a strong impact on the cultural disposition and social welfare of the migrating populations from past to present. Those who escaped Laos during the Communist regime have had experiences of encountering new territories under a culturally different time and space.

In this research paper, I aim to explore discontents and new desires from the transnational migration of Laotian people due to the Communist takeover. My interest in Laos is in part due to a familial connection; my parents immigrated to the United States from Laos during their late adolescent years. Their experiences of assimilating to a new country included the fusion of new, Western values and ideals with more conservative and traditional beliefs that were instilled in them during their upbringing in a developing country. My own upbringing in the United States continues to blend more of these "old and new" and "near and far" ideologies, ultimately

focusing my particular interest in Laos on the transmission of culture and tradition across time and space. My fluency in the language, exposure to culture, and personal identification as a young Laotian-American woman in the United States enhance my understanding of Laotian people and in bridging these understandings to anthropological inquiries.

I begin this paper with a background on Laos as a country and in the scheme of development. I draw on scholars who specialize in studying Laos like Australian anthropologist Holly High and political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott. I follow this with a research question that aims to capture and analyze cross-cultural dimensions of desires and discontents for those who have escaped Laos and who have experienced transnational migration. In developing methodology to answer this question, I approached my research with two sections of fieldwork. I refer to the first section as “Facebook fieldwork”. This widely used social media platform allowed me to examine how globalizing trends impact those living in Laos in current time. I gathered data to assess how particular items, brands, and trends have embedded themselves into Laotian culture and perhaps how these forces have shaped desires and discontents. My Facebook fieldwork helps us understand an “imagined” utility (in economic theory, utility is the ultimate measure of satisfaction and preference over particular goods and services), as material items like purses and cars appeared to have disembedded value. In the second section of my fieldwork, I interviewed three individuals of Laotian descent whose experiences provide greater insight in helping me answer my research question. The three data sets will allow me to create comparable observations on how particular political climates impact desires and discontents and if there are circumstances that are more favorable towards producing utility that is both imagined and tangible. Following each set of fieldwork will be analyses that more directly address my research question. Finally, the concluding section of this paper will explain the implications of this

research—revealing how culture and tradition interact and behave with each other, along with the impact of globalization trends on populations near and far. The findings of this research may help us set the stage for globalization in developing countries like Laos and how changing notions of desire are impacted by the transmission of culture through technology, purchasing power, and perhaps other variables. With the growing interconnectedness of the world and of populations, this insight will help us better illustrate a small fraction of the developing world that is experiencing continual change and integration.

Research Background: Laos and Development

Laos, also known as the Lao People's Democratic Republic, "Muang Lao", or "Pathet Lao", is a small country located in Southeast Asia. It maintains a quiet international profile among its neighboring countries in Asia, and only recently has gained attention in the development world as scholars have begun conducting greater research on the country. Although the availability of basic knowledge has expanded, Laos still remains one of the least well-known and understood countries in Asia. This section aims to explore the political and economic mechanisms that govern this understudied country, relating events of the country's past to its present and future.

Laos is considered one of the world's poorest countries. More recently, however, it has made strides towards achieving greater economic presence in the global marketplace (Rigg 2005, 3). In particular, Laos has implemented widespread economic reform through the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) beginning in the mid-1980s and in 1997 joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Rigg 2005, 3). Together, these two efforts have allowed Laos to step up in political and economic realms, even despite the country's failed efforts of implementing socialist development. Rigg (2005, 3) states that the country has and is currently undergoing a major period of transition—but what particular types of transition apply to Muang Lao?

Transition may umbrella various significances, including “command to market”, “subsistence to market” and “self-reliance to dependency” (Rigg 2005, 12). The direction of these changes will produce various effects on the livelihoods of those impacted in the process.

The first transition that links command to market, a term often used to refer to communist countries, indicates the concept of marketization. As experienced in other developing countries, market transitions tend to almost immediately create societal inequality (Rigg 2005, 12). This risk, however, does not outweigh the possible benefits of a market economy—faster growth would still be a gain for those earning in lower brackets and the quality of the state itself would mature to provide safety nets for all (Rigg 2005, 12). In Laos, however, the majority of its population is unable to internalize these economic changes. The barrier that prevents this understanding is the Laotian people’s lack of interest in development initiatives in their own country. Those with the capability of understanding—who are in possession of televisions and radios—tune into activities occurring in neighboring Thailand. The Lao population and Lao state operate on different wavelengths, and this discrepancy is highly influential on the livelihoods of the greater population.

The theme of subsistence to market is a more dominating and visible transition to the Laotian people. Because the majority of the population resides in rural areas, many are considered subsistence cultivators. They experience “command” in a way that is theoretical rather than executed in practice. Their localized worldview prevents actual experiences of command from impacting their villages on granular levels. Along with subsistence transitions, this population also experiences agrarian, poverty, and livelihood transitions—all of which maintain some type of relationship with market transitions.

According to Rigg (2005, 13), market liberalization is accompanied by “old and new” mechanisms of inequality. Although the process itself generates differentiation, many original forces are still at play. Sikor’s (2001, 944-45) experiences of working in villages in Vietnam led him to argue that the family life cycle impacts household differentiation in both instances of market liberalization and collective production. There are a few minor differences between two; one difference in particular is the potential for earning greater wealth in post-socialist periods. Sikor (2001, 944-45) argues that though the differentiation process is unchanged, the pattern of differentiation has altered. He acknowledges that greater inequalities exist, but that the forces creating these inequalities are still similar for both periods; thus, there are no “old and new” mechanisms producing inequality (Sikor 2001, 944-45). Another way of examining the drivers of differentiation is on Marques and Delgado-Cravidao’s (2001) literature on Portugal. “Old” drivers of social inequity are based on macro-economic disparities and structural differences (between regions, for instance), whereas “new” drivers of social inequity are based on micro-economic disparities between people (Marques and Delgado-Cravidao 2001). This discussion emphasizes the ways in which different scholars with experiences in different regions internalize and structure their explanations on inequality. This creates the problem of bias and judgment towards “new and old” drivers, though both explanations may contribute significantly to our understanding about structures of inequity in Laos. In further examining the impact of structural change, Rigg (2005, 14) refers to the concept of *frisson* and how it cannot be assumed as negative or destructive. Structural changes generated constructive and empowering transitions. Forces that are impacting Laos, like increased market activity, will present challenges that will change and potentially disrupt the livelihoods of the population.

Economic Development

The vision of development plans has long shaped the global worldview of Laos in the market and political economy. There are two alternative visions for the country (Rigg 2005, 19). The first illustrates a country shielded from excess with the absence of modernizing and global market forces. In this instance, Laos is painted as existing in the simplest and most meaningful form of life, where basic standards of living are met and the majority of the population is fulfilled. The second vision illustrates a country that is void of opportunity for development and modernization. This missing key has inhibited prosperity and threatened the livelihoods and survival of the majority. The historical political and economic isolation of Laos from other markets and societies have produced two incredibly different visions for the country.

Both interpretations reveal that Laos is a country “where poverty is pronounced and many people live in marginal existences” (Rigg 2005, 19). The most troubling consequence in this is related to the course of action that development efforts bring—whether modernization generates gains or losses to all levels of society, from governmental to village level operation. Regardless of the impact, the Laotian government is determined to continue efforts to break from its international profile as the least developed country. It hopes to achieve this status by the year 2020, but current statistics demonstrate the complexity of this challenge: “More than one-third of the population live in poverty, seven out of ten villages do not have access to electricity, the under-5 mortality rate is 107 per 1,000 live births, and the adult literacy rate among women is just 55 per cent” (Rigg 2005, 20).

The main strategy that has been implemented to address these challenges is enclosed in the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). This economic initiative began in the 1980s when Laotian leaders were faced with diminishing market conditions on both local and global levels. The leadership recognized the importance of addressing this issue, and in 1986, General

Secretary Kaysone Phomvihane formally announced reform efforts (Rigg 2005, 20). He stated, ““at the present time, our country is still at the first stage of the transition period [to socialism]...Reality indicates that if we only apply the specific economic laws of socialism alone and defy the general laws pertaining to commodity production, or vice versa, we will make serious mistakes in our economic undertaking during this transition period”” (Rigg 2005, 20). This announcement encouraged the movement towards working with market forces under a socialist regime and the overall decentralization of economic decision-making by the government. In November of 1986, this political and economic effort was reinforced through the Party Congress. They began endorsing the NEM in efforts to help alleviate the Laotian economy (Rigg 2005, 20).

Leadership and governmental officials truly believe that Laos has been able to achieve greater economic gains through this program. It has allowed Laos to attract greater foreign investment and expand other sectors of its economy. The impressive economic successes helped generate hope for leaders of the establishment to continue carrying out economic reforms, as a consensus was reached on the ineffectiveness of policies enacted prior to 1985. It must be acknowledged, however, that the actual implications and “successes” of the NEM were rather misleading. The reforms were regionally limited to the capital city of Vientiane, and the concentrated success could not be applied systematically to the entire country.

The gaps between these analyses concern how growth is impacting development on local levels of society. Rigg (2005, 25) explains that the NEM is actually a disembedded and disembodied strategy “in the sense that the way these policies intrude into geographical spaces is only cursorily considered, and disembodied to the degree that the human impacts are rarely addressed.” What we are examining is not developmental progress, but rather theoretical and

envisioned attempts of modernization. It is difficult to capture the actual repercussions of the NEM, as government leaders have a monopoly on capturing and releasing a one-dimensional narrative of economic progress to global institutions and players.

Rigg (2005) explains the consequences of this economic policy through concepts of old and new poverty. Old poverty pertains to rural regions of Laos, where living simple and basic lives are regarded as living in squalor. The people who live there are considered ethnic minorities, residing in the remote uplands of Laos away from mainstream markets. Their involvement with economic reforms of the NEM is limited in scope as their livelihoods are dependent on personal subsistence production. In efforts to incorporate these marginalized communities into economic development, a study was conducted to help gain insight on the biggest challenges ethnic minorities face. The study revealed that the rice deficit was the most pressing issue to address, as “only 58 per cent of households grow enough rice to meet their annual needs...42 percent of households are in rice deficit” (Rigg 2005, 26). The solution to this study suggested the development of physical infrastructure to create market access, along with aiding rice production through the distribution of fertilizers. The focus of the government’s strategy for the incorporation of these communities has revolved around “investment in physical infrastructure” (Rigg 2005, 27). This initiated the Integrated Rural Accessibility Planning (IRAP) project, which maintained the objective of poverty reduction. Government leaders attempted to pursue the IRAP project in an attempt to abolish “tradition” that they believed prevented modernization. The subsistence cultivators lived in a system that perpetuated poverty, and this ultimately held back the Lao nation from reaching its fullest economic potential. Communities and villages that did not comply with such modernization efforts were seen as enemies of the state since they failed to fulfill their national responsibility.

New poverty, on the other hand, is a condition caused by seceding to national demands for market integration. The state itself has declared poverty for them. Scholars like Raintree (2003) and Chamberlain and Phomsombath (2002) believe that areas of concentrated poor “face no population-induced production crisis” (Rigg 2005, 29). Their livelihoods are sustainable, even if state standards suggest otherwise. Rigg (2005) states that new poverty is created both mentally and instrumentally:

On the one hand, the culture of modernity propelled not only by government policies but also by traders and television and radio is creating a mental context where the products of modernization become valued and sought after...At the same time, the poor are being instrumentally created through the unintended outcome of government policies and, in particular, through the operation of area-based development programmes. This has restricted hill people's access to their traditional swidden fields, drawing them down to the valleys where the most productive land is already claimed. (33-34)

Market integration has produced mixed results of allowing some to accumulate wealth and others to achieve intensified poverty. The Laotian government responded to increased impoverishment by explaining that their intentions were not malicious, and that they incorporated cultural considerations into policy-making. Perhaps the extent of their incorporation, however, was simply not enough. A study conducted in 342 rural villages in Luang Prabang examined 6,000 households and found that “social discrimination” shaped development reforms (Rigg 2005, 34). The study revealed that while prosperity was associated with access to markets, there was no relationship between “food security and remoteness” (Rigg 2005, 34). It was impossible to determine if a remote village did not have enough food to sustain its villagers, and interestingly enough, the study actually revealed that villages with greater access to communication and markets had experienced greater instances of food insecurity. The social construction of poverty has no doubt been created through government programs and policies. The story of development

in Laos explains how judgments are made and how policies are created. This has led to great divides among scholars who examine the course that poverty has taken in Laos.

Research Question

In conducting this research, I became interested in understanding the impact of systematic change on granular levels of society. Given the one-sided account of “success stories” as told by the Laotian government, I wanted to learn about the real gaps that exist in this narrative. I wanted to understand the human experience that truly accompanied economic reform and policy. In exploring this curiosity, I realized that there are two major experiences of reform at hand—those who experienced change with transnational migration during the 1980s (from Laos to the United States) and those who currently reside in Laos and have experienced or are experiencing systematic change. The former type of experience relates to those who escaped the country during a period of major economic instability and the victory of the communist Pathet Lao. Their experiences with systematic change pertain to their new interactions with Western policies and structures. Given the constraints of this paper, it would be outside the scope of feasible research to learn more about the livelihoods of Laotians *currently* residing in Laos. Thus, the research question being asked here is: How does political exile generate certain discontents and new desires among the people who escaped Laos—especially those who currently reside in the United States? Political exile will be examined as the catalyzing root of transnational migration.

Research Methodology

To find data on Laos and themes of communism, livelihoods, and desire, academic research and fieldwork will be conducted. Academic research pertains to utilizing library resources for work published by experts and scholars with specialized knowledge about Laos.

Internet resources will be used to search for queries on development projects and grant proposals. Furthermore, Facebook will be used to examine the online activity of Laotian people who currently live in Laos. Observing public profiles will be the main source used for data collection. This “Facebook fieldwork” will be conducted as the initial part of the research study, with the objective of acquiring data on social and cultural trends occurring in Laos. Furthermore, these insights may allow us to capture current desires of the Lao population and help us understand the presence and pervasiveness of globalizing forces through branding and trends. Examining desire in real time may reveal how the interconnectedness of economies and cultures have impacted those who live in Laos, and if there are perhaps similarities or differences on the impact that globalization has had on those who left Laos and migrated to the United States.

The second stage of fieldwork of this study will be executed through three interviews. The first interview will be conducted with a Laotian woman who currently resides in the United States and has experiences of escaping Laos. The second and third interviews will be conducted with first-generation Laotian-American adults (age range: 25-35) who have diverse cultural experiences. The goal of these interviews is to obtain observations and insights with great depth and perspective. Questions like the following will be asked during the first interview:

- Describe your childhood in Laos. What do you remember the most? What is your fondest memory? What did you want to be (occupation/career) as a child?
- What happened when the Communist came to Laos? What was your life like before and after?
- When and why did you come to the United States? What was your first impression of the new country? What was the transition like? Did you know how to speak English?
- How have you seen your culture fit into American lifestyle? (Temple, cultural centers, Lao New Year?)
- Have you visited Laos? If you have, when did you visit and how long did you stay for? What was your impression? How is it different from the United States?
- Would you ever want to move back to your home country?
- Are you in contact with others who currently live in Laos? If you are, do you know what their quality of life is like? Do you think they like living there? What do they think about the United States?

The second and third interviews will be conducted in hopes of exposing the challenges and difficulties of balancing two cultures and in understanding the ongoing transition (if there is one) that their parents have experienced as immigrants. Their upbringing in the United States, combined with the passage of stories from their parents and grandparents, will provide interesting data to assess if Laotian culture and tradition has been adjusted and adapted to American culture. The following questions asked during this interview will be similar to questions asked to the first interviewee, but will also include questions like:

- What was it your childhood like? As the child of immigrants, did you ever face any challenges growing up? If you did, what were some of those challenges?
- Can you tell me more about your parents? What have they told you about coming to the United States? What do you think their hopes and aspirations are for you?
- What do you think are your parent's hopes and aspirations for themselves? How have they adjusted to American culture? Do you think your parents want to return to Laos? Do you think they like living in America?
- What challenges do you see in terms of maintaining your culture and heritage as a Laotian-American?
- Do you plan on passing on Laotian culture and tradition to your children when you are older? If so, how do you plan on incorporating that culture? How do you plan on maintaining tradition for yourself (if you intend on doing so)?

Data gathered from these interviews will contribute to the conversation on discontents and desires of Laotian immigrants in the United States. The experiences and stories of fleeing Laos, as retold by themselves or their children, will highlight realities of transnational migration—the good, the bad, and the stark contrasts between culture, history, and tradition. The movement of this population over physical time and space echoes the story of communism, political exile, and migration in Laos.

Results, Part I: Facebook Fieldwork

In the initial part of my research, I gathered data from public Facebook profiles of those currently residing in Vientiane, Laos. The profiles that I have examined are of ethnically Laotian people and approximately consist of thirteen male and twelve female profiles. The objective of

this experiment was to observe photos that were posted by the person and photos that the person was tagged in, along with likes, follows, and comments made by the person. This allowed for the cross-cultural analysis of common brands, items, and styles shared between Laos and other countries like the United States, Korea, and Europe.

Limitations in this study must be acknowledged. There was difficulty in ensuring that photos were not double counted and in ensuring that the random sampling of profiles did not generate repeated profiles that were already studied. The random sample of the profiles were acquired by going on a specific person's friend's list and finding profiles with the following qualifications:

- Profiles that clearly stated that he or she resided in Vientiane, Laos currently or that he or she was working in Vientiane, Laos currently (in the case that the person was not from Vientiane, but worked in the region, extra attention was given to photos and profile activity to ensure that the data collected was from Vientiane. It must be noted that there was no complete certainty in determining which photos or activities were taken in or occurred in Vientiane. I used my best judgment by paying attention to details like dates and locations that were included in the post or activity.)
- Profiles that had lower privacy settings to ensure that I had access to photos (profile, cover, and album photos), his or her lists of friends, his or her "About" section, and other details listed on his or her profile. Since approximately 20 minutes were spent examining each profile, I wanted to ensure that there was sufficient data to gather from each profile.

The risks associated with acquiring new random samples by going on a person's friend list are skewed data and repeated photos. Skewed data may be a result of similar interests between friends; I could not be completely sure of how closely related profiles were to each other—

perhaps some had closer friendships and relationships than others. Repeated photos were common, as two or more friends were tagged in photos together. This was monitored as closely as possible to prevent double counting.

Another limitation in this study is the Facebook culture of posting and portrayal. Facebook is not necessarily representative of real life—it does not capture or portray negativity in thoughts and photos as much as it reveals what users want others to see. This behavior does not portray the most accurate representation of one's lifestyle, but it does help us understand and gauge desire—both material and subconscious desire through emphasized sections of profiles or through the repetition of posted photos. Despite the number of limitations in this study, observing Facebook profiles proved to be a powerful tool in acquiring real-time perspective and insight on globalizing trends in Laos.

In designing this project, I was not sure which trends would be the most popular or what should be expected from conducting online fieldwork. I collected data by spending 20 minutes on each Facebook profile and made notes on the types of brands I saw in photos, different countries that were mentioned, fashion and beauty trends, and other observations that stood out. I tried to find an equal number of male and female profiles that all appeared to be in their young adulthood years (18-30 years of age). I made a list of key terms (i.e. "Pepsi") that I continually added to every time a term appeared in a photo or in a profile activity. When I organized my data into an Excel spreadsheet, I re-organized the terms into categories. The categories that resulted were: Food Items, Fashion, Electronics, Entertainment, Cars, Sports, and Other (Cars, Sports, and Other are combined in Figure 4 and Figure 6.). The results of this data are in the pages that follow.

Category: Food	Number of Times Identified
Pepsi	23
Ketchup	1
French fries	1
Heineken	8
Coca-Cola	4
Fanta	3
Pizza	3
Krispy Kreme Donuts	1
Sushi	3
Royal Dutch Beer	1
Nescafe	1
Lays	1
Red bull	1

Figure 1: Data on the different types and frequencies of food brands or food items found.

Category: Entertainment	Number of Times Identified
Taylor Swift	1
Barbie	3
Linkin Park	1
Twilight (movie)	1
Cartoons (Dr. Seuss)	2
Comics (Batman, Spiderman, Superman)	7
Minions	4
Emma Watson	1

Figure 3: Data on the different types and frequencies of entertainment found.

Category: Electronics	Number of Times Identified
iPhone	39
Android (phone)	16
Blackberry (phone)	1
Other kinds of phones	3
Canon	14
Digital Camera	2
Dell	2

Figure 2: Data on the different types and frequencies of electronic items or electronic brands found.

Category: Cars/Sports/Other	Number of Times Identified
BMW (Logo)	1
Toyota	2
Ford	1
Basketball	1
Fitness Photos	2
Chinese New Year Red Envelopes	1

Figure 4: Data on the generalized category of "other".

Category: Clothing & Beauty	Number of Times Identified
GAP (shirt)	1
Fitted suits for men	10
Louis Vuitton	4
Chanel	3
Ray-ban	2
Adidas	5
Coach	2
French manicure	1
Vaseline SPF 24	4
Acne Vitamin Cleanser	1
NY/Yankees Hat	2
Braces	2
"I love Korea" Shirt	1
Lacoste	1
Michael Kors	1
New York City Shirt	1
Nike	3
Chevrolet Shirt	1
American Eagle Shirt	1
Polo Ralph Lauren	1
Makeup Forever	1
Urban Decay	1
Raiders shirt	1
Armani Exchange	1
YSL	1
Hermes	1

Figure 5: Data on the different types and frequencies of clothing and beauty brands and items found.

Facebook Data Collection of Global Brands, Items, and Figures Identified in Vientiane, Laos

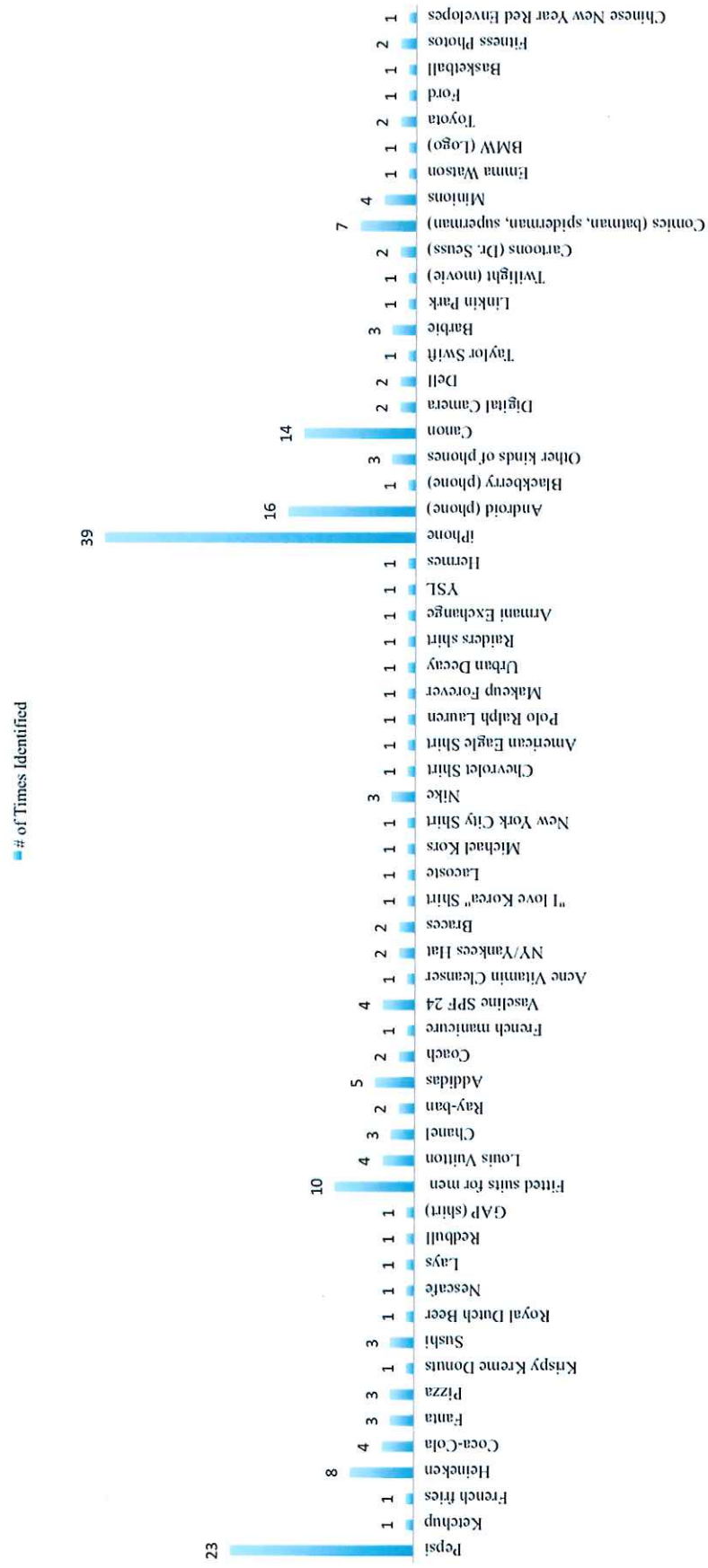
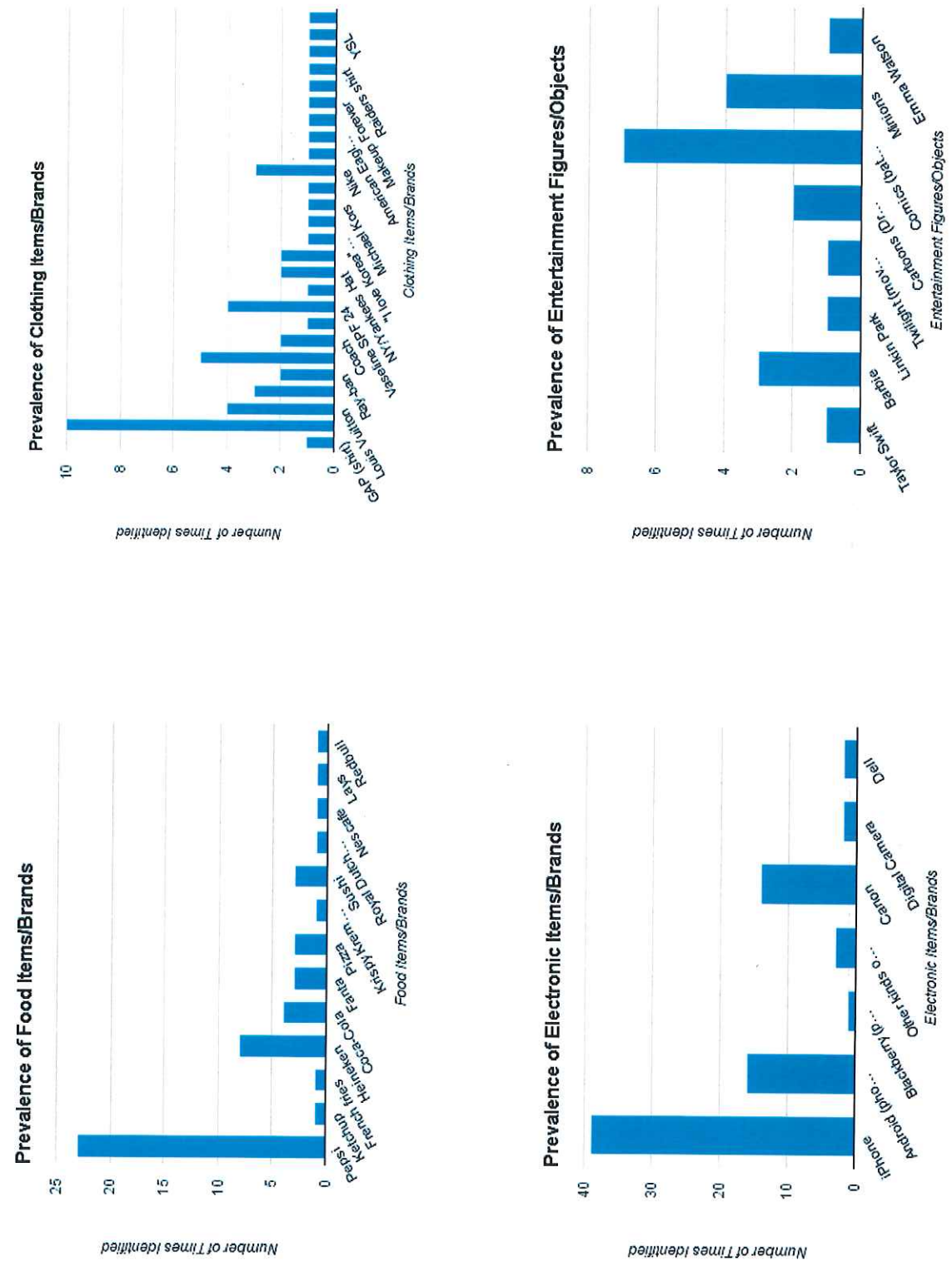


Figure 5: Cumulative graph of Facebook data.

Figure 6: Graphs of categorized Facebook data (5).



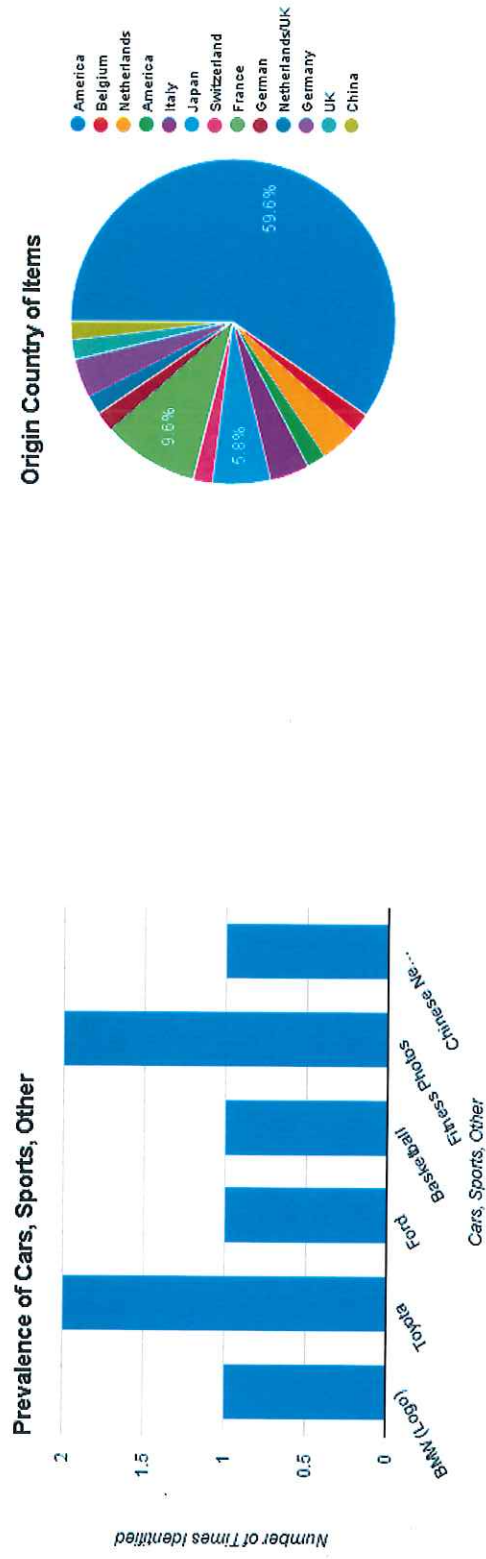


Figure 7: Distribution of brands/items by country of origin.

Discussion of Facebook Fieldwork

The categories were created after all the terms, brands, and items were collected and organized. These categories are representative of or are related to material items that can be argued as objects of conspicuous consumption, an idea proposed by Veblen (1899) in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The purpose of conspicuous consumption is to consume to manifest social power, rather than to consume for actual demand. The first category that will be discussed are food related items and brands (as shown in Figures 1 and 6). The most common food brand was Pepsi. Pepsi was found 23 times across 25 different profiles and was only identified in pictures. The brand was either displayed as a soft drink or as a logo on a table or a chair. The majority of the pictures that included the Pepsi brand were pictures of parties, gatherings, weddings, or of restaurant outings. Pepsi was strongly associated with social settings, as people in the pictures appeared to be cheerfully drinking Pepsi alongside water and at times, with alcohol. The brand and drink communicated themes of leisure, relaxation, and fun. The second most popular food item was Heineken, a beer from the Netherlands that is popular in many countries like the United States. Heineken, like Pepsi, was only depicted during group settings and appeared to possess a social function of enhancing the leisure experiences of those enjoying the beer. Finally, the third most popular food item was Coca-Cola, another soft drink brand that made appearances in photos of parties and gatherings. These three drink items are from brands that are not local to Laos, demonstrating how globalization impacts the individual experience.

Insights and observations made pertaining to fashion items, trends, and brands also reveal interesting findings (as shown in Figures 5 and 6). The most common “fashion trend” that stood out was men’s formal apparel. In many pictures of parties, weddings, and/or religious

ceremonies, Laotian women wore their traditional cultural outfits called a *sinh*. A *sinh* is a long tube-shaped skirt that varies in fabric and contains ornate details and patterns. A nice blouse or a matching top is worn with the *sinh*, along with a scarf-like accessory that is placed across the body and folded in a particular manner. Different ethnic groups style their *sinhs* differently, but nevertheless, this outfit is symbolic of Laotian tradition and culture. As depicted in the data, men's fashion was not limited to the male version of Lao traditional attire. Men appeared next to Laotian women dressed in *sinhs* in fitted black, navy, and grey suits with satin finishes and slim cuts. The most popular brand that appeared in pictures depicting fashion was Adidas—a German brand with lines of athletic apparel and shoes. The pictures that featured Adidas were usually of people working out; it was rare to see athletic gear being worn in casual or leisure settings. The most interesting observation made about this category is the wide range of brands and items observed in comparison to other categories. The vast array of different brands ranging from makeup to purses implies great availability and choice.

The third category—electronics (see Figures 2 and 6)—was interesting in that it revealed similarities in the phone habits of young Laotians and young Americans. In the majority of pictures, there was at least one person holding an iPhone or an Android phone in his or her hand. Many of the pictures that were posted on these profiles were “selfies” (or even in one particular instance, a screenshot of a Face Time conversation with another person). The hallmark of technology and electronics was in the form of cell phone use. The availability of cell phones and its widespread use in Vientiane contributed to the overall livelihoods of Laotian youths. Another common and popular electronic device was the use of Canon cameras or other digital cameras (brands of those digital cameras were unidentifiable). In a few cover photos that were examined, photography appeared to be a very important hobby. Those who owned Canon cameras or other

types of digital cameras posted considerably more pictures (and pictures of higher quality) than those who did not appear to explicitly own a sophisticated camera.

The fourth category—entertainment (see Figures 3 and 6)—included a wide variety of cartoons, artists, and comic book characters. The most popular form of entertainment was superheroes—many wore shirts with pictures of Batman, Spiderman, and Superman. The fifth category (see Figures 4 and 6) denoted the types of cars that were prevalent among Laotian people. They were limited to a few—BMW, Toyota, and Ford. In the twenty-five profiles that were studied, only a few pictures depicted cars. This is may be due to the lack of infrastructure and road systems throughout Laos, which eliminates the practicality of owning a car. The last two categories—sports and other (also refer to Figures 4 and 6)—depicted how fitness and basketball were important priorities to a few Laotians. Finally, Chinese New Year Red Envelopes were also found in some pictures; this was noted as a cross-cultural celebration of welcoming the New Year.

Discussion of Photo Collection

The following photos were also collected alongside brands and items as further evidence for globalizing trends and cross-cultural patterns. The photos were captured from the Facebook profiles that were examined and stood out as excellent examples of conveying what is desirable to Laotian people living in Vientiane. Whether the picture portrays desirable material items such as fashion, beauty, or musical preferences influenced by regions near and far, these photos support our insight on desirable lifestyle characteristics for Laotian people.

Entertainment: Music and Movies



Figure 8: Music likes on Facebook by a Laotian youth (male).



Figure 9: Movie likes on Facebook by a Laotian youth (male).

The photo on the left (Figure 8) was taken from the music section of a profile that was examined. This stood out in particular because of the diversity in musical choices. Jrock Radio, for instance, is a Japanese rock radio station that plays a certain type of rock native to Japan. JuNCurryAhn is a young Korean boy who composes music with his violin. EDM music, or Electronic Dance Music, is a type of music that is popular worldwide and is played in nightclubs, festivals, and raves. Though the exact origin of EDM music is debatable, many attribute its rise to musicians in the UK or in the United States. DJ Snake is a DJ and rapper from France who is also a part of the EDM music scene. Finally, the concert tour—"Road to Ultra: Thailand"—is a worldwide EDM concert featuring many hip hop artists, bands, and DJs. This concert tour has a globalized reach; in the United States, it is an incredibly popular music festival that takes place in Miami, Florida every year. This collection demonstrates cross-cultural musical preferences, as the user is inclined towards EDM, Korean, and Japanese music—musical choices that are not local to Laos.

The photo on the right hand side (Figure 9) captures one user's movie preferences and likes on Facebook. There are a variety of movies, with production ranging from in the United States to Korea. Some of the movies also have Laotian titles instead of titles in their original language. Furthermore, there is great variety in the type of movies "liked", from cartoon cinema—The Minions—to a superhero-based film—Deadpool. The widespread impact of these movies allows for the transmission of culture across borders, and the "liking" of these movies reveals that some movies in particular have greatly impacted the user's entertainment preferences.

Food and Drink

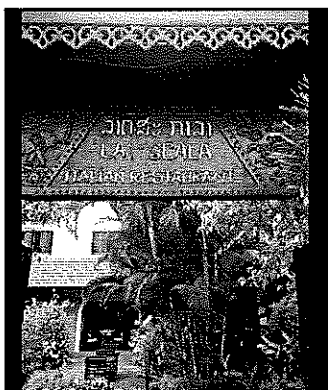


Figure 10: An Italian restaurant located in Vientiane, Laos.



Figure 11: Drinks posted by a Facebook user in Vientiane, Laos.

Figure 10 is a picture of La Scala, an Italian Restaurant, located in Vientiane, Laos. It is considered a fine Italian boutique restaurant that serves nice wine, Italian food, and seafood. In conducting follow up research on the restaurant, I found an impressive list of positive reviews by visitors of the restaurant. Some commented on the true Italian taste of the cuisines while others commented on the excellent ambiance and fantastic décor of the restaurant. Though the price of the cuisine, relative to other restaurants, is more expensive, many visitors believe that the quality and taste are worth the price. La Scala is an interesting example of cross-cultural influences on

cuisine, especially when considering differences in ingredients and in the cooking processes of traditional Laotian and Italian food. The photo on the right (Figure 11) depicts a collection of various drinks—Beer Lao, Heineken, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and other alcoholic beverages. The variety of drinks and brands suggests that there is a globalizing presence in everyday consumption.

As explained by High (2014, 25), eating together is one of the most important aspects of Laotian culture. Food is at the core of rule and life in Laos. The promise of having enough food to eat has been central to maintaining the livelihoods of many. Thus, the strategy that the government has implemented in efforts to reach out to the masses is the promise of food security. The underlying importance can be explained by Scott's (1979) understanding of food, peasants, and equality: "food and the imagery of food is at the center of peasant notions of equality. Equality and redistribution are also, of course, an integral part of the ideological vision propagated by revolutionary elites." High (2014, 26) supports this notion by explaining that because the actual act of eating rice is associated with social and familial realms, rice gains "political force" through these associations. Rice is a crop symbolizing social efforts, family, power, and money. This may explain why many of the Facebook photos examined in this research are focused on eating and drinking food together and perhaps why globalization is more susceptible to these particular items. The value placed on food may be influential enough to make the Lao people seek variety and quality in consumption.



Figure 12: A Laotian model promoting Vaseline lotion with sun protection.

Beauty and Fashion:

The photo to the left (Figure 12) depicts a Laotian model advocating Vaseline as a brand ambassador. Vaseline is a company

that produces and sells various moisturizing and beauty products, and the specific bottle of Vaseline being advertised is localized to the preferences of Southeast Asian women. Beauty standards in Laos, as supported by High (2014, 70), equate whiteness with beauty. Though this is not an uncommon belief in many Asian countries, High (2014, 70) was taken aback with her experience of interacting with a young Laotian woman, named Peng, who considered herself ugly because she did not have fair skin. Peng believed that she was “black”, and her male colleague was quick to agree that she was not as beautiful as High. Later on that evening, High and Peng were assigned to the same lodgings. As she looked through her belongings, High noted that she was the most interested in her beauty products: “My collection of sunscreens, moisturizers, and skin care products evoked particular interest. ‘What is this cream for?’ she asked of each one...I replied to her queries. ‘Oh,’ came Peng’s satisfied reply. ‘This is why your skin is so white and beautiful. You can afford to buy all of these creams and stay inside all day. You have money’” (High, 2014, 71). High (2014, 71) was shocked by Peng’s suggestion that she only had fair skin because of “manufacture rather than nature”. In Peng’s mind, however, she saw her dark skin as a bodily manifestation of poverty. To her and her friends, working in the countryside in rice fields explained how poverty becomes a person, as his or her skin grows darker and blacker with more time spent in the fields. Their aspiration for wealth went hand in hand with their desire to become white.

Figure 12 demonstrates how the Vaseline brand captured these sentiments. The bottle states that the product provides an SPF of 24 and promotes “healthy white” skin. The advertisement in the background also mentions a hash tag to follow—“#VSLSPF24LAOS”. I researched this hash tag further by entering it into another social media platform called Instagram. Instagram is an application that connects people together through photos, and hash

tags are used frequently to group similar photos together. From my search, I found five photo results on Instagram. All five of the photos depicted five Laotian models that were all fair in skin tone. Photos like Figure 12 have propelled notions of beauty and whiteness in Laos. The underlying message of their beauty standards is related to the cultural desire to achieve higher-class status and wealth.

Results, Part II: Interviews

Interview #1—

“I was like a piece of cloth that you could fold in any direction.”

The main focus on the second part of my fieldwork was on qualitative data acquired through interviewing. My first interview concentrated on my Mother’s journey to the United States, her experiences of new time and space, and on the hardships she endured through her cultural transition. Growing up, my childhood was filled with endless stories and lectures about the challenges that she encountered and persevered through as an immigrant. Though I heard many of the same stories time and time again, I only understood bits and pieces of her journey to the United States. For the most part, she and my extended family were very cautious about discussing their migration to the United States. There were specific topics that they never discussed, and it appeared that there was a consensus between all family members about what was permissible to say and what was not. There were many moments in my childhood when responses to my questions were thick with uneasiness and paranoia.

Because of this, I was surprised that she agreed to let me interview her. I began our phone interview by asking her when she came to the United States. She paused quickly and responded, “I believe 1982...I graduated high school in 1984. My English was really poor.” I was intrigued by her immediate remark about her inability to communicate, but I assumed that this was because her language barrier had the most profound impact on her cross-cultural experience. I

followed up with this by asking about her high school experiences—about how she was able to graduate if she couldn't speak English. She explained to me that she started high school in the middle of the 10th grade because she had enough credit from completing high school in Laos. A Lao counselor who was an interpreter and translator assisted her in the process of enrolling.

Memories of high school in America haunt her to this day. When she was a student, she was scared to talk to others. White people, she recalled, intimidated her the most because she could not communicate with them. When they tried to talk to her, she would walk away in silence. She relied on her Laotian friends for help: "Most of the time, I had to ask my friends who came to the United States before I did. They knew English...even going to the cafeteria...I had a hard time communicating with them. I didn't even know what the word "now" meant." She spelled "now" out loud to me, "n-o-w", to emphasize that she faced challenges with even the most basic words and terms. It was apparent that her language barrier was the biggest contributor to her fear of social interaction and assimilation to American culture.

Back in Laos, she did not have these struggles. She had a happy childhood and was spoiled by her mother. She recalled frequent shopping trips and how she was always dressed with the latest styles and had new book bags and accessories. Her parents enrolled her in a private school, and she always found herself in trouble for sleeping in class and earning zeros on her assignments and exams. When she was almost faced with expulsion, her mother had to step in to beg the principal of her school to allow her to stay. She spoke disapprovingly of her behavior because of the financial investment and commitment they made towards her education.

Overall, the quality of their life in Laos was comfortable. They lived in the capital city—Vientiane. Her mom was a stay at home mom. They had electricity and a maid to take care of her and her siblings. This all changed, however, when the communist party gained control. She had

just finished her first year of college during this time, but could not continue because her parents decided to leave the country. She began explaining her journey to the United States:

“They paid money to go to Thailand. We went to south of Laos in Savannakhet to cross the river. Grandma paid someone to get us across the river during the night to make sure the communist didn’t see us. If the communist saw us, we would have died. They would have shot us. I remember it was around one or two in the morning. I was so small, but I carried your one of your Uncles...it was either Song or Vong. They were both infants. I also had a bag with me. We got to the countryside and luckily nobody saw us cross the river. Two or three guys came to pick us up from the village.”

Her tone quickly fluctuated to a saddened sternness. I was shocked by the severity of the situation, and not knowing exactly what to say, I responded, “That’s scary. Did you cry?” She replied, “No. At the time, if you crossed the river, you couldn’t let anyone hear, so you couldn’t cry. If there were any noise, then we’d get killed. A lot of people got killed.”

I asked her if everyone went—if all eight of my aunts and uncles went over at once with her. She said that all nine kids, including her, crossed the river with Grandma. Grandpa had escaped Laos first because the circumstance was harder for him. He used to have a high paying job as the manager of the International Airport of Laos. They feared that he would be arrested as a result. Her mother was left with nine children to care of, and it was her responsibility to get everyone to *muhk ahan* in Thailand (a refugee camp). I quickly understood just how much responsibility my mom came to bear. She was the eldest daughter, and she had to step up to care for her infant siblings. They stayed in Thailand for nine months and flew directly to San Diego when her grandparents were able to sponsor her family to the United States.

Their motivation to leave their home country was to find opportunity. She stated, “We wanted to have our freedom. We became poor after the communist. There just wasn’t enough food, and there were nine of us. I would have died...many of us would have died. We could never trust the communist.” Though there was an immense risk to fleeing, there was even greater

risk with staying. She explained that “there are other people who are there still—they had land and money left behind for them from parents or grandparents. When Grandpa got sick after the Communist took over, Grandma had to sell everything. Everything changed after that...we became poor. That’s why I work really hard...because we became really poor. My life was full of struggle. I had to help Grandma to take care of my siblings and work really hard.”

I was saddened, but impressed by her story. Without hesitation, she began explaining the difficulties of transitioning to a new country: “They said I was ugly. Lao people who came to the United States before us made fun of me. They didn’t want to socialize with me. I always needed someone to translate for me, so I had to take my time to listen and learn.” She continued the conversation discussing other obstacles that she faced in her life. Many obstacles were related to relationships and marriage.

Though she had feared white, American people, she interestingly enough had admiration for them. They were big and tall. They were able to communicate freely. She looked up to “white, American families” because it seemed like everything was put in place for them. The consensus among the Laotian friends she made at work was that whoever married an Engineer “made it”; they would no longer have worries or the burden of navigating uncertainties of a new country. She was young, immature, and at the time, believed in this, too. At the age of 22 years old, she got engaged to a white, 30-year-old man from Connecticut. They bought an engagement ring together, and when they brought the ring home to her parents and her older brother (to ask permission for marriage), the outcome of the proposal did not turn out as she had expected. She recounts her parents telling her that she could not get married because they are Laotian and he is American—it would be impossible for the two families to get along. She was disappointed, but listened to her parents. She decided not to marry him, gave the ring back, and asked him for

more time. She told him that it was too early in their relationship, but ultimately decided that she could not marry him. Differences in culture and her naivety contributed to the end of their relationship.

She eventually got married to a Laotian man, but shortly after, faced the challenge of becoming a single mother in her early 30's. She faced the challenge of caring for and feeding two children on her own, and she was committed and determined to provide. She stated with certainty:

“For a long time, my life was out of order...my marriage—it failed. And I had no choice but to raise my kids on my own. I had to go back to school to finish. If I didn't have kids that I had to raise, I don't think that I would have my degree. That was my motivation and inspiration. I knew that in my heart, I had to take care of my kids no matter what...so how was I going to survive? If I didn't have an education, how was I going to handle being a single mother? That's why I work hard.”

She encountered more hardship when her desire to get re-married conflicted with Laotian tradition and culture. She was still fairly young and wanted to get married again, but her mother disapproved of this desire. She recalled her mother telling her that she is too old to raise her kids for her. This made her angry. At the time, she felt like she was robbed of the opportunity to find a husband. But her mother was relentless and reminded her about how she grew up in a broken family. With a reflexive tone of voice, she said that her mother was right: “If I got married back then, I don't think my children would be as successful as they are. I might have had another child, and that would have caused problems within the family. I took my mother's advice and decided to raise my children on my own and to the best of my ability. I put all my effort into that, and until now, I am still single.”

These hardships allowed her to improve her life in ways that she never imagined she could. She reflected: “When I came over, I knew nothing...can you imagine how different my

life is right now? I am a college graduate. I make quite a bit of money. I drive. I am a lot better than some of the Laotian men that I have worked with in the past. (She laughs.) Sometimes, I think to myself—why? What happened to me? I never thought I would have this day.” She was in semi-disbelief that this was her life. It did not seem like too long ago that her friend had to hold her hand to walk across the street because she was afraid of roads. That is why, to her, she must continue making sacrifices for her family—so her loved ones can improve their lives as she continues to do for herself.

An example of her sacrifice is ironically her refusal to get re-married. She said that she is sacrificing that aspect of her personal life for her children. It is not her choice to be single; her family is more important to her. She wants to ensure that her children have every opportunity for success because she is able to provide them with her complete attention. Now that she is older, she also has gravitated more towards maintaining tradition. She has been able to maintain Laotian culture within her community. Though her experiences in the United States have not reminded her much of Muang Lao, there have been opportunities to embrace her culture: “I guess there is Lao New Year...we celebrate, go to the temple, and follow the culture...but it is not really the way it is back in Laos.” She also attends temple services frequently. When she is there, she catches up with old friends and eats traditional Laotian food with them after the main service. She enjoys her time at the temple because it provides her with community. Despite her desire to maintain culture and tradition, she believes that she no longer has any attachments to her home country because in her own way, she has acquired the American Dream for herself. She became independent in every way possible and is proud of herself for surpassing and overcoming the challenges she faced to get there.

For this reason, she does not intend on moving back to Laos at any point. She has spent the majority of her life in the United States and has fully adjusted to the culture and environment. Furthermore, she appreciates the higher quality of life that she has here: “Do you think I would get used to it? Using the restroom...I would die. The environment wasn’t and isn’t very clean...I just wouldn’t be able to do it.” While at the refugee camp in Thailand, she recalled how she fainted twice because of how dirty it was. I said that I understood her concern and that I was very surprised by how specific her response was about the challenge of transitioning back to Laos. I asked her if she thought that a higher quality of life would be achievable given the fact that the cost of living is much less than her current cost of living. She replied: “The communist are still there. I don’t trust the communist. They can change. They flip flop at any time. I’ve lived here in the United States for a long time. I have more here than I would there, and I don’t have family there...my parents and siblings are here.” She explained that she wants to retire in the United States to continue having access to this lifestyle. Her quality of life is guaranteed to be better. She did point out, however, that her life would be very different if she was still living in Laos. There would be less to worry about and less cultural change: “If I was in my country with the communist...it’s a different way of life, *louk*. We don’t have to think about differences in culture. We also don’t have the same worries as in the United States. No mortgage payment...we would have to work to buy food and that’s it. There are little bills.”

Her finishing thoughts capture future uncertainty but contentedness about her the rest of her life:

“My kids are old, and I don’t know what I want to do in my career. I am at this company, and I am comfortable...if I stay here and if I take care of myself, then I am okay. I went to school for ten years, and I have a great degree. I do wonder how can I pursue my career further or if I should stay here at the company for as long as I can. I don’t know what I want to do. Of course I want more money, but I don’t want to stress myself out. I want to take it easy because I have worked so

hard raising my children and putting them through school. Right now, I am relaxed. I don't have anything to really worry about."

Interview #2—
Sunny's Vientiane Café

The second interview was conducted with a Laotian woman in the Philadelphia community. Her name Sunny, and she is a first generation Laotian-American. I stumbled across her contact information after researching more about one of the most popular Lao-Thai restaurants in West Philadelphia—Vientiane Café. She and her family run and own the restaurant, and I had the pleasure of interviewing her to learn more about her experiences of living in the United States and her family's experiences of fleeing Laos to the United States.

At around noon on a Friday, I walked into Vientiane Café—a Lao-Thai restaurant I had dined at once last year. It looked exactly as I had remembered it—nicely renovated with ornate décor of elephants and lotuses. Both a year ago and during my visit that day, I sat at the same table and examined the restaurant with curiosity and intrigue. This was the only restaurant I had been to in Philadelphia that made food that tasted like my Grandma's. The voices coming from the kitchen made me smile, too. In the last few years, I have rarely heard people speaking in Lao—a language I grew up with but barely speak now.

I walked up to the counter of the empty restaurant and was greeted by a young, Asian waiter. I told him I was there to meet with Sunny, the daughter of the owners of the restaurant. He looked at the clock and said she was not in yet, but she should be there soon so I could take a seat in the meantime. I thanked him, sat down, and received a text from Sunny that said she would be running late. I took that as the opportunity to look around and observe the restaurant. They had just opened; the tables were not set yet and utensils were piled in the corners of each table. In the windows, there were bamboo plants that had traditional rice baskets (*thip kao*) that

hung around the shoots of the plant. There were a few paintings of elephants on the wall—this reminded me of artwork from the Buddhist temple I grew up going to. I looked up at the ceiling and noticed what appeared to be a garage door. It was pulled up all the way—I assumed that they had expanded their restaurant at one point in time. Two men in their early 60s and clad in aprons walked from the kitchen to the storage room and back a few times. Each time they did, they greeted me with a nod and a smile. I was not sure if I should have said “Sai Bai Dee” to them (which means “hello” in Lao). My Grandmother always scolded me for not knowing the proper way to greet older adults. I sat silently contemplating what I should have done.

A few minutes later, the nice waiter brought me a glass of water, and Sunny came in shortly after. She was young and petite, sporting a stylish denim romper with Birkenstocks and blonde hair. She looked a bit hurried, but gave me a quick smile and headed straight to the counter to drop off her purse and green juice. After she put down her belongings, she approached the table that I was sitting at. We shook hands, and as she sat down, she immediately asked me in Lao if I was Laotian. I told her that I was, and she asked me in Lao if I can speak our language. I told her that I am fluent, but I rarely speak it now since I am far away from home. I assumed that she was going to ask me more questions, but she sat silently, staring at me. I began feeling awkward, so I decided to start asking her questions. I explained to her my research interest in Laos and in particular, how political circumstances and events in Laos caused many to migrate to and settle in the United States. I began by asking her about her own experience or perhaps her family’s experience with migration.

Her face expressed confusion and uncertainty. She said very shortly, “Don’t know much about it. I was born here. My sister still remembers vaguely about how they escaped from Vientiane to West Philly.” I felt that I had asked too big of a question too soon, so I began

explaining to her that my mother had similar experiences of fleeing the country as her mother and older sister did. I hoped that this would warm her up a bit to my question. She began explaining to me that her family arrived in West Philly, specifically at the other end of Baltimore Street, in the early 80s. She was born in 1984. Her older sister is nine years older than her, and she recalls, “I remember my mom would tell me how she carried my sister along her back and swam across the river to Thailand.”

When her parents first came to the United States, they worked odd jobs that she referred to as “immigrant jobs”. Her mom, along with other Laotian immigrants in their neighborhood picked blueberries during seasonal farming jobs, worked at fish markets, and at sewing companies. Shortly after she gave birth to Sunny, however, she could not work as much. She began cooking food at home and sold her food to people in their neighborhood. She sold traditional Laotian food like barbeque chicken satay and papaya salad. Her food gained popularity among the Laotian community in their area, and not long after, her small business venture began growing. More and more people came to their home for meals—giving rise to the “Blue Tent”.

The Blue Tent was what the neighborhood came to know as their backyard restaurant. Her dad blocked off their backyard space so that others could not look in while friends and family came to dine in their home. At ten years old, Sunny was assisting her mother with cooking, cleaning, serving, and hosting their guests. The Blue Tent became popular in their neighborhood and was symbolic of Laotian culture and tradition. It preserved their heritage and provided a safe space for refugees to spend time with friends and family after working in the fields or in other lines of “immigrant employment”. Sunny and her family unknowingly and

unintentionally created a community center in their backyard by bonding Laotian immigrants through traditional cuisine.

Despite its cultural significance to the West Philadelphia community, the Blue Tent was forced to shut down by higher authorities. They were not a formally licensed business, and therefore were not prohibited to serve the public food. This devastated the community, and Laotian immigrants no longer had a place to gather after work to eat and spend time. But this did not stop people from coming. The contribution that Sunny's family made to the community was far too important to be forgotten, even if they faced the challenge of being shut down. People knocked on their door, and from time to time, her mom would allow them inside her home if they agreed to pretend to be a family guest. After a few months, Sunny's mom realized that this set up was not sustainable and that she had to figure out a new way to serve her community.

This was when community support helped bring Vientiane Café to life. They initially partnered with a restaurant at a nearby university campus to have space to cook and serve their food. Sunny and her family were eventually able to find their own space—it's current location—in November of 2002. They opened in 2003 with 25 chairs, and over a decade later, they have expanded to 49 chairs. Sunny said, "The community helped us start our business. When I was younger, I did not understand much, but we did it. We survived through the recession, and we are expanding and growing." She attributes much of this success to her mother, her roots, and to the original "Blue Tent".

Her mother is the main woman in charge. She runs the business as if she was still running the Blue Tent. She wanted to preserve Laotian tradition in the same way that the Blue Tent did for their community. The most important principle that she has maintained, according to Sunny, is affordability—"ten years ago we made it affordable for people to come eat more than once a

week, and that is what my mom wanted.” Her mom made it financial feasible for the entire community to come together and share stories and laughs. Under her mother’s vision, Vientiane Café has maintained affordable prices for its customers and the Laotian community so everyone can enjoy traditional Laotian food.

When Sunny’s mother fled the country and came to the United States with her older sister, she did not expect to create her own American dream. Sunny reflected on this: “When they came to America, they didn’t think they would have a business. They built that American dream without building it—it was unintentional. They didn’t have the resources back then to go to school and educate themselves. The puzzle kind of welded together naturally, and for them to escape all that...it was pretty awesome.” Her mother still works everyday as the manager of their kitchen, but hopes to retire in Laos soon. In fact, she has recently finished building a house in Vientiane that she plans to live in. Sunny remarked the irony of the situation because her mom just acquired American citizenship. She pondered, “I don’t know why she didn’t get it sooner. She was holding onto something...maybe it was her Lao citizenship because that is where her home is. She is going at the end of this year to visit for a month...[I think] she misses her homeland.” I was very intrigued by this and expressed greater interest in understanding her mother’s desire to go back to Laos. Sunny agreed with me—she was not quite sure why her mom wanted to go back or why she wanted to spend half the year in Laos and the other half of the year in the United States. She said that she planned on having another conversation with her about this decision.

As she finished discussing her mother’s desire to go back to Laos, two customers walked into the restaurant. There was a man and a woman dressed in work attire. I assumed they were out on their lunch break. The man approached Sunny. He asked her if she remembered him. She

responded enthusiastically, “Of course I do! Welcome to my restaurant!” They had both attended West Catholic High School together years ago. The two caught up briefly, and afterwards, the waiter seated him and his colleague. Sunny explained to me that her mother had to enroll her into a private high school because the community school she went to was bringing her down the wrong path. She said quietly, “I had to go away for three years.”

My face expressed confusion. Sunny explained: “I had more Lao friends during my childhood, and in high school, I had more Vietnamese friends. Most of my Lao friends were gang bangers and took drugs. I hung out with them...where I grew up there was always prostitution and drugs.” She spoke with a lowered, almost motherly tone, “I was about that life, but my parents didn’t want that for me. They sent me away to live with my uncle for three years in the suburbs. My elementary school teacher told my mother that if I did not leave, I was going to go down a very bad path. So I lived in the suburbs in a different environment with *khon khon* (white people).” She started laughing as she explained how different she was from her peers. She recalled that “white girl” asked her if she was from Philly because she had an accent. This didn’t bother her, though, because she was proud to be from Philly. The only thing that she did change was the way she dressed. She said that everyone dressed properly. She went shopping so she didn’t have to wear her “gang banging clothes”.

Sunny also recalled being very stubborn and headstrong as a child. She brought sticky rice and Laotian food to school and had no problem eating it in front of kids who weren’t Lao. Her mother was also very involved in maintaining culture. Before she went away to live with her uncle, her mom would dress her up in traditional Laotian apparel to dance in festivals with other girls her age. Her mom was very supportive and did the best she could to provide for the Lao community. Sunny noted that she stopped participating in these cultural fairs and activities when

her mom ran into trouble with the Lao community. She explained that when her mother was experiencing difficulty with running her business or her “backyard restaurant”, they took advantage of her and made the situation more difficult. She seemed saddened by this, so I decided not to ask her to elaborate any further.

Instead, I took this as an opportunity to ask about her children—if she had any, and if she did, how she maintains Lao tradition and culture in their lives as second generation Laotian-Americans. Sunny told me that she had two boys. The oldest is thirteen years old, and her youngest is 9 years old. She smiled as she spoke about them and explained how they have very different personalities. The older one is very mature and focused on doing well in school. The younger one is more active and hyper—he has ADHD—and has trouble focusing in school. He is, however, very excited about working in the restaurant and helping maintain their family business one day.

Sunny also explained how she has recently gotten in touch with her culture as an adult. She took her children to the temple for Lao New Year for the first time to teach them the process of *thak bhat*. She taught them how to sit down and pray, and her oldest son appreciated her efforts. Sunny’s said that her goal as a mother is to preserve both Vietnamese (her husband is Vietnamese) and Laotian culture for her children. She wants to show them their culture and give them examples by taking them to events like Lao New Year. For Sunny herself, she stated that she would like to become more involved in the Laotian community and attend temple celebrations more frequently. She said that the Lao community in Philadelphia is very dispersed and not entirely concentrated in a particular area. For this reason, she is looking forward to the opportunity to run into childhood friends and reconnect with the community.

In the next 10 years, Sunny is hopeful that Vientiane Café will grow and expand. Her goal is to be more spread out throughout Philadelphia and potentially in the suburbs of New Jersey. She said enthusiastically, “It took us 10 years to expand that way (she points to the other side garage door on the other end of the restaurant), and within 10 more years, maybe we will have two more locations.” People travel near and far to enjoy the food that Vientiane Café serves, and its impact on the Laotian community in Philadelphia still stands strong. There are not many restaurants that offer this type of cuisine, and Sunny is proud to know that Vientiane Café is a leader in that regard. Even back in Laos, her family has maintained a long tradition of working in the restaurant business. Her grandmother owned a noodle stand in their homeland, as she explained how their love of food came second nature to both her and her mother.

She finished our conversation with a tone of hopeful hesitation. Sunny said that she wants to be a part of preserving Laotian culture in Philadelphia by leveraging her restaurant and her love of food to the community. However, she is not sure if the community will grow stronger:

“I want to believe so, but I guess we will just have to wait and see. Like I said, I want to keep going to the temple every year and keep connecting. I can’t really reach out to others because I am busy running the restaurant. But I still want to make an effort to reconnect. One guy came into our restaurant to eat the other day and told me that he remembered when my sister used to babysit him. Now, that’s something to preserve.”

Interview #3—

“And consequently, they will always feel like foreigners in their own country

The final interview was conducted with another first generation Laotian-American. Unlike Sunny, his childhood and upbringing was very different. Throughout the interview, he was much more reserved and short in answer. His view on the desires and discontents of his family, as a result of migration to the United States, was much more formulaic. The tone of this interview captured “causes” and “effects”.

He described his childhood as simple and happy. He grew up with modest means and a single mother with a large extended family, but never noticed the difficulties accompany such circumstances. He stated, "All material needs were met and had fun with the neighborhood kids." Growing up, he wanted to be a mathematician or an astronaut. His interest began in the third grade, when he decided to read a math textbook and fell in love with the topic. His decision to read a math textbook was caused by the fact that he disliked reading, and his math textbook had the least amount of words. His fascination with astronomy began in the first grade, when a staff member at his elementary school gave him a star map. Though he had a keen interest in school and was determined from a young age to excel in his academics, he was enrolled in a class for those learning English as a second language.

I asked him if he thought that was necessary. He appeared to be a hard worker, and as a young child, desired lofty and ambitious goals. He stated that it was necessary when he was younger, due to being raised Laotian. Though he was fluent in both languages, he assumed that his English was accented and expanded on this by saying: "My memory is hazy, but I do remember being 3 or 4 and not being able to play with the neighborhood kids due to a language barrier." When asked if this was ever a challenge or insecurity he had growing up, he stated sternly and shortly, "No."

The biggest challenge for him during his childhood was to convince his family of "the merits and value of certain activities". He was aware that his parents and extended family were immigrants. They came to the United States from Laos looking for better opportunities. Money was tight so it had to be spent frugally. This added to the difficulty of convincing his mother to send him to summer camp or to invest in particular resources like violin lessons that he believed would enrich his life. The biggest challenge that he currently faces now is communication with

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his family members. Many of them still have a “Laotian mindset” and are set in traditional and conservative ways of thinking that have not adjusted to Western values. As a young adult, his struggle to arrive at agreeable conclusions with his family members due to cultural differences is a major source of discontent.

He stated that his experiences of overcoming those challenges had to be met with persistence. He saw “no alternative really”, and though his discontent may require endless arguments, he believes that his family is ultimately supportive in his decisions. He also stated that as he gets older, their communication barrier would be alleviated much more. While their mindset might not necessarily change, he stands firm in believing that they will accept what he believes. Though they are set in their own ways, they will have to accept his decisions, especially as age grants him more power and autonomy over his own choices.

He reasoned that differences in culture and in upbringing account for why they are set in their ways and are unable to see him eye to eye. He stated: “I was raised in a Western culture and exposed to these ideals from spending a lot of time at school. We also face different challenges that shape our views. Their lives are dominated by immigrating, whereas my life is dominated by building a life in America.” Intrigued by his very black and white answer, I asked him if he believed it was practical to incorporate Asian culture, specifically Laotian culture, into Western culture, and if he would be interested in maintaining certain cultural beliefs when he starts a family in the future. I was surprised by his response: “I can’t list them, but their culture is certainty infused in my own views and life. So there’s no question about whether I will pass on some values. And that’s what they taught me to do...to pick the best part of each culture—education, respect for elders...those will definitely be virtues in my family.”

He reasoned further that it is nearly impossible to imagine his life trajectory with a different cultural mindset. He cannot quantify or fully explain how Laotian culture has impacted what he desires for himself—whether in career, education, marriage, and friendship. The one decision that is certainly a manifestation of his upbringing, however, is his decision to pursue a Ph.D. His decision to pursue his degree is not related to bringing pride to his family. He explained, “If anything, money is more prestigious in Asian culture, but ever since I was young, it was drilled into me to become educated. I was taught that you could lose everything except your education.”

His personal motivation for the goals and aspirations that he has set for himself is in the fact that he enjoys learning. He expressed, “Reading and really internalizing stuff is fun for me. I can’t really say I work hard on everything—I spend time on things I like, but when I don’t like something, I won’t do it.” This motivation has shaped his current desire of finishing a strong Ph.D. and his future desire of starting a technology company. He has not fully considered or thought about starting a family, but he said that at some point, he would want to provide his children a good life. Though his own childhood was not the most traditional, he still had a nice childhood given the hardships that his mother, aunts, and uncles endured coming to the United States. He explained that they want him to have a good, stable job so that way he can live the life that they never had—especially one where money would not be an issue.

His family faced extreme financial hardship during the communist takeover in Laos, and their escape did not guarantee immediate prosperity in the United States. Their experiences with poverty account for the reason why money was always a constant worry for them. Though their financial situation is much better than now than it was in the past, their struggles have left a lasting impression on their lives. He concluded our interview by stating that he still cannot and

will not be able to understand his family's desires and discontents. It is without doubt that political exile impacted their lives both negatively and positively, but he cannot answer to what extent and how specifically, as he feels "wholly American". He stated: "It is clear that they struggled to fit into a new country and culture. They are more jaded about America and develop nostalgia for their home country. And consequently, they will always feel like foreigners in their own country."

Discussion of Fieldwork

The three individuals who were interviewed all contribute different perspectives and outlooks on transnational migration, the fusion of two distinct cultures, and how these experiences contribute to shaping one's desires and discontents. The first interviewee experienced escaping Laos firsthand; she recalled sitting in a boat with her infant brother in the middle of the night in hopes of arriving at a refugee camp in Thailand. The second and third interviewees were both first generation Laotian-Americans whose childhoods fused both Laotian and Western cultures together, despite experiencing different manifestations of culture in young adulthood. All three of these stories and the individuals who are living them have experienced, in one way or another, the full effects of globalization.

The first interviewee reflects a journey of migrating to the United States for freedom. She stated, "...we became poor after the Communist. There just wasn't enough food, and there were nine of us. I would have died...many of us would have died. We could never trust the Communist." Her desire for freedom was to ensure her survival and her family's survival—it was a quest to generate economic independence to maintain basic sustenance, a natural right that was stripped away from them due to political turmoil. In search of a better life, she and her family left their home country to a new, foreign space.

The political and economic oppression that she experienced continues to shape her worldview to this day. Her father was forced to flee the country to a refugee camp in Thailand while she and her family remained in Laos. As the eldest daughter in a family of nine children, she was expected to assume maternal duties to assist her mother. Though she was just a child herself, she was not excused from bearing great responsibilities during this critical period in her life, which would ultimately determine the fate of her life and of her family's life.

Though fleeing Laos was incredibly risky, the potential reward of having an opportunity for a better life made fear and discomfort afterthoughts. Gaining this freedom certainly appeared to generate optimism for their future. But, however, it was not shy of presenting new challenges and hardships for her and her family. Her inability to communicate with others as she entered the American education system and her adjustment to new cultural norms appeared to be the most difficult and daunting challenges. This discontent was described when she explained how as almost a young adult, she had to be accompanied by her friend to walk across a street. She further recalled how she could not order food in her high school's cafeteria without assistance because she could not understand English. Her inability to understand and communicate basic terminology debilitated the freedom that she assumed she would be guaranteed.

Cultural differences between Laotian and Western tradition had a strong presence and impact on her life. Major life events like marriage and starting a family juggled in between these two spheres, and, at times, were intertwined with conflicting ideas and beliefs. For her, marriage was something that she had valued; she believed that starting a new life in the United States with an American would make her transition easier. The time she spent engaged to an older white man, however, revealed difficulties in navigating cultural boundaries that her family was not willing to separate from. When she asked for permission to marry him, they expressed that she

was not allowed to because they came from two distinct backgrounds. They were too different to be compatible: "It was culture. Plus, I was so naive. I was like a piece of cloth that you can fold in any direction. I had to listen to your Grandma and Grandpa a lot, so that way I would not make a mistake."

Her eventual marriage to another Laotian man, however, did not ease the growing pains of marriage while adjusting to a new culture. She expressed naivety, stating that she thought marriage was simple and she could get divorced if things did not work out. She quickly found out that this was not the case and divorced young. This resulted in a new hardship of raising two children on her own, and this, in its own way, paralleled challenges of her journey to the United States from Laos. She felt the instinctual need to survive in an environment that posed threat and danger to her family's well being. In Laos, that meant fleeing the country with her family in search of opportunities for food, shelter, and employment. In her more current experience as a single mother, that meant acquiring an education to earn a salary that would support three mouths. She described this challenge: "...I knew that in my heart, I had to take care of my children no matter what...so how was I going to survive?" As both a young girl in Laos and as a young woman in the United States, she found herself making sacrifices and taking the lead for the betterment of her family once again.

Her refusal to re-marry also demonstrates a cultural devotion to her family unit. When she was young and newly divorced, she hoped to find a spouse to help make her family whole again. She explained her initial frustration with her mother when she discouraged her to remarry. At the time, she did not understand why, but as she got older, she saw clearly that her personal sacrifice was the right decision. This was justified by her maternal instinct to protect her children, the desire to avoid disruption of her nuclear unit, and the respect that she had for her

mother. If she hadn't devoted all her time and energy to her children, then she feared that she would disrupt the dynamics of her family by introducing her children to a man who did not have their best interests in mind.

Cultural expectations of respect for both the elderly and parents also reinforced the sacrifice she made for her family. She explained that her mother pushed her to remain single because of her own life experiences: "One of her examples was about having stepbrothers and stepsisters...that's why she never had a good life. She didn't have a mom who was a mom to her. Her grandma raised her, and she eventually had to support her grandma. She had to drop out of high school even though she was a smart student." She was fearful of making this example a reality for her children. The notion of survival was a dominating force in her life and may ultimately explain her feelings of uncertainty, fear, and caution pertaining to the family unit.

The importance of the mother-daughter relationships in Laotian culture was also elaborated on further when she recounted a story about running into her old friend from high school at a Buddhist temple. This was the same friend who held her hand to cross the street in high school. She reflected on this encounter:

"She's struggling and very poor. When she graduated from high school, her mom made her marry a Vietnamese man. He gave her mom five thousand dollars and five baht of gold in exchange for her. They had two kids, and he abused them all. Eventually, he left and she had the kids... she worked as a fisherman and sold fish. She never had time for her kids, even when they were sick. So their neighbors notified the county, and social workers took them. One is in a foster home, and the other one was adopted. She got very sick after she found out that her kids were taken away from her."

The tone in her voice was filled with sadness and sorrow for her childhood friend, especially when she described how this marriage was simply an economic arrangement. Her mom cared more about receiving a dowry than her own daughter.

This story made her reflect on her own life and her decision to divorce her husband. She explained, “My point is that I could have never guessed that my life was going to change the way it did. It is 100% different. If I stayed with my husband, I would have nothing...there would be nothing in my body or soul.” This meant that she would have been void of happiness and of the desire to live happily. She would be empty and have no sense of self. Her emotions, feelings, and hope for a better future could and would not exist.

She reflected on the differences between her life in the United States and a hypothetical life in Laos. The nostalgic tone in her voice made me wonder if she desired a simple life in Muang Lao. Though globalization has changed the country and specifically the city she grew up in, Vientiane, it appears that quality of life is still very different when compared to the United States. There are less economic and cultural complications in their way of life relative to her experiences as a citizen of the United States. When asked if she would ever go back to Laos to live there, she said quietly, “I don’t think so.” Her response was a bit surprising.

She left her home country for a better life, but encountered major obstacles in the United States that she otherwise would have not faced in Laos. Her failed marriage, for instance, would have taken a different fate in Laos. She stated that if she never came to the United States, she would have had an arranged marriage that would be set up by her parents. She explained, “They would find me a husband from a family with a similar status as ours probably. Growing up, I was trained a lot—I learned to clean, cook, go grocery shopping...stuff like that. My mom taught me everything.” Through an arranged marriage, the traditional age to be married in Laos would be around 20 years old, and the steps would be to graduate from high school, get a job, and then get married. Though there is a similar progression in life and marriage in the United States, the

difference in culture is explained by youthfulness in age and the lack of personal autonomy in picking a partner.

Before the Communist took over in Laos, she described herself as a spoiled, young girl who nearly failed out of private school. This political shift changed the economic footing of her family—robbing them of their wealth and subjecting their lives to danger and potential starvation. Thus, she was forced to mature quickly and work harder for her siblings and parents. The traumatizing experience of fleeing her country, living in a refugee camp, and arriving to the United States without the ability to speak a word of English had profound effects on her wants and desires. She ultimately assimilated herself to a new country, a new language, and a new set of traditions; and slowly, but surely, she was able to find her own successes and shape her dreams and aspirations according to what she wanted, not according to the political and economic turmoil she faced in her early childhood and young adult years. Those scarring experiences of political exile, however, did indeed generate discontents about her home country. This discontent is related to her fear of going back to her home country and paranoia that going back would result in the loss of her self-earned wealth. Her trust and hope for Laos was permanently lost, so leaving the country was the best decision that she and her family made. Though they risked their lives to start over in a different country, the freedom they envisioned, the opportunity for an education, and the chance for rebuilding personal wealth was worth the hardship.

Similar desires for greater advancement and opportunity were echoed in conversations held with the second interviewee—Sunny Phanthavong. She is a first generation Laotian-American who was born and raised in West Philadelphia. She grew up in a poor, immigrant neighborhood where drugs and prostitution were norms. She internalized and accepted violence

in her community as a part of her life, and when she wanted to get away, she would bike to Penn's campus to pick apples from trees and spend time at a pond near the biomedical building. She explains that in her "concrete jungle", Penn was the place that her and her friends escaped to when they wanted to see "the rich kids". Although she witnessed many hardships growing up, she conveyed that her childhood was happy and that those experiences have shaped who she is as a young adult.

Food is an extremely important theme in her life, and she believes that the concept of eating together is vital to maintaining tradition. She recalls how as a ten year old, her mom taught her how to cut raw chicken and make Laotian food. She assisted her mother in the kitchen when they would have guests over to sell food to. Over the years, she has developed a passion for serving Lao-Thai cuisine to guests at her family's restaurant. Food has played a major role in her life as mechanism to bond with others and as glue between culture and tradition.

In the future, her goal is to continue creating, making, and serving food to and for others. She would like to open two more restaurants in suburban regions in the next 10 years and truly believes that the type of food she serves is groundbreaking—providing those who do not have exposure to Laotian culture the opportunity to learn more about it. She wants to disseminate culture, as she describes the east coast as "dry" in terms of the number of Laotian restaurants in business. The problem is that Laotian food hides behind the popularity of Thai food. Sunny explained that Thai dishes actually draw on many Laotian ingredients; Thai food does not traditionally include sticky rice and that is actually a predominant part of Laotian cuisine. The adoption of sticky rice in particular dishes and different types of Thai "salads" (which are a play on the Laotian dish of *laab*) demonstrate the influence of culture on food. Sunny's goal is to

illuminate traditional Laotian cuisine to audiences seeking and exploring new types of food, along with maintaining, spreading, and embracing culture and tradition.

Her excitement to continue reconnecting with childhood friends at the temple is similar to the first interviewee's temple experiences. In both instances, the temple has been ground for the rekindling of old friendships. The first interviewee recalls how she ran into her high school friend who was "sold" by her mother into an awful, abusive marriage. Sunny's run-ins with past friends have not been as saddening, but she does reflect on the difficult circumstances in her neighborhood when she spent time with these old friends. She was lucky to have a mother who realized the importance of removing her from an environment of drugs and gangbanging. Sunny was given the opportunity to live a better her life, even though her parents did not have the most access to financial resources. She turned her life around and maintains honor and tradition by supporting her parent's business. The observable desires from Sunny's story include her ambition to grow her business, her dedication to preserving and spreading Laotian tradition and culture, and supporting her family—specifically her mother.

On the other hand, her mother's desires are to return to Laos. Her motivation to return home demonstrates the powerful effects of globalization. She escaped Laos for better opportunities in the United States, and in her own way, created her American Dream unintentionally. Perhaps through the power of technology and the access to communication, she was able to maintain a strong relationship with her roots. She was able to preserve, maintain, and even create culture in Philadelphia by means of food production. It is possible that this recurring theme in her life made her closer to and more connected to being Laotian and holding Laotian citizenship. It is also possible that the only dramatic effect of globalization in her life was when she was forced to flee Laos. She could have very well settled in her immigrant neighborhood

without desiring to assimilate to American culture. Cooking could have been her expression of reverting back to her culture. Regardless of which explanation accounts for her desires, it does not appear that living in the United States was ever a “discontent”. Retiring in the United States could be a source of discontent, but all in all, it seems that the success of their business has only allowed for her to earn greater purchasing power both in the United States and in Laos. Her desires and discontents are highly influenced by her experiences of living in the United States and the opportunities for economic and social prosperity.

My final interviewee communicated very clear desires and discontents. As a young adult in graduate school, his goals were simple—to graduate, and to one day, start a family with the means to provide for them comfortably. His motivations are both due to his cultural upbringing and personal desire to learn. Growing up, he witnessed how valuable education is. He learned that one could be stripped of all wealth and material goods; the only exception to this was education. Perhaps this was influenced by his grandparent’s journey to the United States. His grandfather grew up poor and worked his way up to establish a sound career for himself. He acquired and was able to accumulate great wealth, but this was quickly taken away from him when the communist party began their rule in Laos. And once again, his grandfather had to experience living with nothing.

My interviewee expressed discontent when discussing the challenges of his family’s cultural transition (or the lack thereof) to Western ideals. He struggled to explain to them the value of investing in activities that were not directly related to academics. He had arguments with them about the importance of participating in summer camp far away from home, in sports, and in playing musical instruments. Though he spent many years fighting for what he believed would contribute to his education in indirect ways, he is aware of the challenges that will still

persist as a young adult. There is a discrepancy between what his family believes and what he believes; he is hopeful, however, that with time they will come to accept these differences. He states in a very assured tone that they *must* accept his beliefs, as there is no other option. With age and greater economic autonomy, he will be able to make decisions for himself that they cannot control. He hopes that perhaps his demonstration of success while maintaining personal autonomy in decision making will make them realize that they should be more accepting of Western tradition and values.

The stories and experiences of these three interviewees highlight major cultural differences between Laos and the United States. These differences are exasperated by globalization, which has generated highly influential life events and circumstances that shape their current desires and discontents.

Conclusions

The goal of this research is to understand the desires and discontents of those who have experiences with transnational migration from Laos to the United States. I sought to understand the ways in which Laotian people came to understand their quality of life—their satisfactions and dissatisfactions—through time and space. Given the political and economic landscapes that are imbedded in this conversation, my research hopes to highlight differences, similarities, and trends between Western and Laotian culture. It also aims to explore individual experiences of systematic change, which helps highlight structural failures and successes.

The fusion of cultures between these two countries was a major theme in this paper. The new ideologies and beliefs that resulted impacted the way that my research participants thought. This meshing of culture was at the center of their motivations, desires, and discontents. They identified with bits and pieces of ideology from both countries, carefully selecting the ones that

were best suited for them. In doing so, they were able to construct a fused culture that was unique to their individuality. Whether that included beliefs on marriage or business ventures, their diverse palette of experiences is the result of active globalization.

Another unifying theme was opportunity. They themselves or their parents demonstrated a willingness to persevere through the challenges of migrating to escape from communist rule. This political force prevented them from living the way that they desired to live; migrating to the United States gave them the chance to correct this. It not only gave them the opportunity to maintain basic sustenance, but also have the opportunity to maximize their earning potential to earn greater purchasing power. The idea of conspicuous consumption is applied here. The possibility of being able to purchase material items and accumulate great wealth is an attractive idea that would be otherwise difficult to achieve in Laos. Just as important as the opportunity to pursue these opportunities is the autonomy for creating financial prosperity. The ability to make financial decisions for oneself—through acquiring an education or creating a business—was important to the interviewees.

It is clear that their new, desirable livelihoods exhibited characteristics of the American dream. Their discontents were related to struggles and obstacles they faced when achieving their “American” goals of independence, greater purchasing power, and ownership of material items. This research is significant in that it reveals the mechanisms that allow for marginalized groups to succeed. By understanding what they want for themselves in new time and space and in their experiences of pursuing those opportunities, we can see the ways in which systematic structures work in their favor and against their favor. This is an important implication in examining the scheme of national development in countries like Laos. Prosperity from development is contingent on more factors that extend beyond statistics and reform policies. To truly achieve

success on a systematic level, policy and reform must be examined through various lenses that capture flexible opportunities for all.

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